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ABSTRACT

Because the core curriculum for reading education evolved in an unsystematic manner, it has no "official sanction" and is thus very difficult to challenge or to supplement. The traditional "publish and wait" means of challenging existing conventions or submitting alternative propositions has changed without notice, largely due to increased political activism and information inflation. One approach to combatting these two factors is to establish a core literature that would provide a body of commonly known facts that could be alluded to in discourse among members of the field. Developing a core literature would necessarily involve ranking the most frequently cited articles, studies, and books; critically annotating the most highly ranked citations; and maintaining a committee responsible for recommendations and revisions. The list developed by Nancy Wilcox contains 43 ranked citations, but none of the logical refinements to which this list lends itself diminishes the value of a departmentally sanctioned list. A sanctioned core literature would be very much like a "controlled substance" in pharmacy: it could be powerful when appropriately governed and used by ethical, well trained, practicing professionals, although dangerous where any one of these elements were absent. The Wilcox list is appended. (HTH)

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TOWARD A CORE CURRICULUM FOR READING EDUCATION

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It probably is time to delineate a consciously constructed core curriculum for reading education. Of course, in a sense one can already be said to exist. But, then, this is precisely the problem. Because it evolved in a non-systematic manner, and because it has no "official" sanction, it is very difficult to challenge it, or to submit new entries to it.

The traditional "publish and wait" means of challenging existing conventions or submitting alternative propositions has changed without our notice. Two factors, or elements, are largely responsible for these changes, increased political activism, and information inflation.

Political Activism

State and federal laws recently mandated that the physically, emotionally, and learning disabled be "mainstreamed" into the general school population. This well intentioned regulation was instigated primarily by parent groups. Struck by the success of such direct lobbying, several major universities have hired professional lobbyists in an attempt to circumvent peer review grant competitions and to have major, long-term awards for "centers" legislatively assigned to their institutions.

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Information Inflation and Dilution

The number of journals in the field has quadrupled, while the actual number of articles has increased by an even more substantial multiple when account is taken of conference proceedings, document storage systems, monographs, and reading research published in journals outside of the field, which also have multiplied.

This level of growth constitutes a quatum leap from previous times and suggests the need to reappraise the conventions suited to the prior levels of production.

The primary, though hardly solitary, side effect of this sometimes called "information explosion" is a dilution-of-effect of publications suggesting that it might better be called 'information inflation'. This condition takes two forms: one is the tendency for theories and propositions which have been challenged soundly simply to be overlooked in the sea of other publications; and, the other is for new propositions of considerable quality also to be leveled to all others published during that period.

There are several contiguous influences of, and upon, this dilution-of-effect condition to be found throughout academic life and beyond. Quality of research and publications, for example, hardly are factored-in to most "merit" systems. One can almost hear the university managers saying, "Yes, I know that you published a documented means for improving critical thinking last year, but what have you done lately?"

These problems, of course, are not new, but they cannot be easily shrugged off as world tensions rise and the traditional crisis prevention role of education is diluted to insignificance just when an even greater level of potency is needed.

A Core Literature for A Core Curriculum

One means which suggests itself to combat politicism and information inflation is to wade into the center of the problem and, perhaps, thereby correct its mis-emanations. This "bit-of-the-hair-of-the-dog-which-is-biting-us" approach could be undertaken on a trial and learn basis by trying first to establish something of a "core literature" for the field.

A core literature would provide a frame of reference of commonly known "facts" which can be alluded to in discourse among members of a field across time and place. In this way it could serve as a point of departure in illustrating different perspectives, critical reactions, and alternative propositions. Widely known studies and articles always have had a communication and continuity value far in excess of their intrinsic value. Their intrinsic value, however, often has become exaggerated due to the fact that the original work escapes the debate which would accompany a more official sanction. Margaret Mead's Coming of Age in Samoa, for example, stood unchallenged for years. Ironically, it was because this work was so widely referenced as to become unofficially sanctioned that it finally achieved sufficient noteriety to attract a myth squelcher. But this took over fifty years. In the interim several generations of students had their impressions of cultural anthropology defined by the meanderings of a naive, young woman with more skill as a writer than as a trained observer.

The greatest likelihood is that an "official" sanction of this work at any time in the past would have sped up this process, and greatly advanced the state-of-the-art.

Reluctance Understandable

Reluctance to identify a specific set of articles, studies, and/or related books can take many forms, each of which has its own legitimacy. Abridgment of academic freedom, fear of enshrining things which should be permitted to wane, and loss of individual professional potency to the judgments of a larger unit are among the most strongly felt concerns.

In place of trying to anticipate and detail a rebuttle to each of these points, I have opted to address more fully some 'Other Problems and Benefits' which I find to be persuasive for a core curriculum.

Other Problems and Benefits

Informal inquiry and personal experience have revealed that, with the exception of the final or research seminars, too little of the literature of the field is presented in typical graduate courses. The identification of a core of articles and studies, by some form of concensus, would provide course professors, state departments, and text book writers with a greater sense of purpose in citing, teaching, and testing knowledge of at least of these studies. In so doing, we likely would feel more inclined to mention yet other artcicles and studies, and to more actively encourage students to read current journals and monographs for further validations, refinements, or refutations of that "core" literature.

This was brought home strongly to me by a recent published collection called Reading Research Revisited (Gentile, Kamil, and Blanchard, 1983). Frankly, this text brought better organization and more stimulating discussion to my Reading Research Seminar than I have ever been able to achieve before.

While I do not find the authors' choices of selections fully appealing, the benefits far outweighed my personal objections. The works selected permitted my students to become connected to all others using the text nationally and internationally, and for them to "hear" the deliberations and reactions of other professors represented in the text to a selected core of ideas and studies.

The success of this book argues further for a means of identifying and sanctioning a core literature for an eventional core curriculum. In a de facto sense the authors selected the profession's first core literature, a fact which, I imagine, must cause them apparent pleasure, but some consternation as well, for there is no sanctioned list with which to agree or disagree.

In any case, in an attempt to achieve some of the benefits of a core curriculum with few of the hazards, I offer the system stated below and findings by Nancy Wilcox, a former Educational Specialist Degree student, to the initial steps of the proposed model.

Model for Establishing a Foundational Literature

1. Count the most frequently cited articles, studies, and books of any type found in the most often used textbooks in a given college or university department.

2. Submit this list for initial ranking (1-7 Scale) and suggestions of additional references to the staff of that department.

3. Critically annotate the most highly ranked citations.

4. Re-submit to the department for re-ranking and to other departments for national normative data.

5. Seek a vote of approval and support for publications and distribution of the completed project from a recognized learned society.

6. Thereafter, a committee within the society should be responsible for recommending when a revision would be in order.

The Wilcox List

Nancy Wilcox conducted steps one and two (see below). She identified eighty citations in the ten most frequently used texts in the Division of Reading Education, University of Missouri-Kansas City. This list was reduced to forty-three by a ranking procedure. Each citation obtaining a four or higher average rank from the professors was identified as a foundational, or core, citation. These, then, were listed in descending order though not numbered as such for there were many ties.

What Next?

Much can be done with the Wilcox List. As noted, it can be critically annotated. Other departments can re-rank the citations. A more sophisticated system of categorization can be used in a subsequent ranking. The most frequently raised question by the professors doing this initial ranking was on what basis were they to consider each citation. Should these have been considered in terms of simple historical value(?), as making a fundamental point(?), as a representative piece(?), or by some other propositional category.

None of these logical refinements has diminished the value to our graduate students of a departmentally sanctioned list. In due course most every profes-

sor will express qualifications of several, if not all, of the citations on this list. But each, too, now knows something of the other and of our collective image, which can be changed through reasoned persuasion.

Closing Thought: A Controlled Substance

In considering a new proposition one employs all matter of metaphors and analogies to test the credibility and value of the idea. Several such analogs were alluded to above.

Still one other occurs to me at this time. It is the sense that a "sanctioned" core literature would be very much like a "controlled substance" in pharmacy. It could be powerful when appropraitely governed and used by ethical, well trained, practicing professionals, though dangerous where any one of these elements was absent.

The effectiveness, influence, and credibility of a profession can almost be calculated solely by its willingness to accept and deal with the paradoxes of danger and power.

Facing this challenge squarely could be a small but significant rite of passage for professional education in general, and for reading education in particular.

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